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PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

1492-PRESENT

"Historians may well view it as a step toward a coherent new version
of American history." —Eric Foner, *New York Times Book Review*

Justice David Brewer in 1892 that "this is a Christian nation," says of the separation of church and state in the Revolution that it "was neither conceived of nor carried out. . . . Far from being left to itself, religion was imbedded into every aspect and institution of American life."

One would look, in examining the Revolution's effect on class relations, at what happened to land confiscated from fleeing Loyalists. It was distributed in such a way as to give a double opportunity to the Revolutionary leaders: to enrich themselves and their friends, and to parcel out some land to small farmers to create a broad base of support for the new government. Indeed, this became characteristic of the new nation: finding itself possessed of enormous wealth, it could create the richest ruling class in history, and still have enough for the middle classes to act as a buffer between the rich and the dispossessed.

The huge landholdings of the Loyalists had been one of the great incentives to Revolution. Lord Fairfax in Virginia had more than 5 million acres encompassing twenty-one counties. Lord Baltimore's income from his Maryland holdings exceeded 30,000 pounds a year. After the Revolution, Lord Fairfax was protected; he was a friend of George Washington. But other Loyalist holders of great estates, especially those who were absentees, had their land confiscated. In New York, the number of freeholding small farmers increased after the Revolution, and there were fewer tenant farmers, who had created so much trouble in the pre-Revolution years.

Although the numbers of independent farmers grew, according to Rowland Berthoff and John Murrin, "the class structure did not change radically." The ruling group went through personnel changes as "the rising merchant families of Boston, New York or Philadelphia . . . slipped quite credibly into the social status—and sometimes the very houses of those who failed in business or suffered confiscation and exile for loyalty to the crown."

Edmund Morgan sums up the class nature of the Revolution this way: "The fact that the lower ranks were involved in the contest should not obscure the fact that the contest itself was generally a struggle for office and power between members of an upper class: the new against the established." Looking at the situation after the Revolution, Richard Morris comments: "Everywhere one finds inequality." He finds "the people" of "We the people of the United States" (a phrase coined by the very rich Gouverneur Morris) did not mean Indians or blacks or women or white servants. In fact, there were more indentured servants than ever, and the Revolution "did nothing to end and little to ameliorate white bondage."

Carl Degler says (*Out of Our Past*): "No new social class came to power through the door of the American revolution. The men who engineered the revolt were largely members of the colonial ruling class." George Washington was the richest man in America. John Hancock was a prosperous Boston merchant. Benjamin Franklin was a wealthy printer. And so on.

On the other hand, town mechanics, laborers, and seamen, as well as small farmers, were swept into "the people" by the rhetoric of the Revolution, by the camaraderie of military service, by the distribution of some land. Thus was created a substantial body of support, a national consensus, something that, even with the exclusion of ignored and oppressed people, could be called "America."

Staughton Lynd's close study of Dutchess County, New York, in the Revolutionary period corroborates this. There were tenant risings in 1766 against the huge feudal estates in New York. The Rensselaerwyck holding was a million acres. Tenants, claiming some of this land for themselves, unable to get satisfaction in the courts, turned to violence. In Poughkeepsie, 1,700 armed tenants had closed the courts and broken open the jails. But the uprising was crushed.

During the Revolution, there was a struggle in Dutchess County over the disposition of confiscated Loyalist lands, but it was mainly between different elite groups. One of these, the Poughkeepsie anti-Federalists (opponents of the Constitution), included men on the make, newcomers in land and business. They made promises to the tenants to gain their support, exploiting their grievances to build their own political careers and maintain their own fortunes.

During the Revolution, to mobilize soldiers, the tenants were promised land. A prominent landowner of Dutchess County wrote in 1777 that a promise to make tenants freeholders "would instantly bring you at least six thousand able farmers into the field." But the farmers who enlisted in the Revolution and expected to get something out of it found that, as privates in the army, they received \$6.66 a month, while a colonel received \$75 a month. They watched local government contractors like Melancton Smith and Matthew Paterson become rich, while the pay they received in continental currency became worthless with inflation.

All this led tenants to become a threatening force in the midst of the war. Many stopped paying rent. The legislature, worried, passed a bill to confiscate Loyalist land and add four hundred new freeholders to the 1,800 already in the county. This meant a strong new voting bloc for the faction of the rich that would become anti-Federalists in 1788. Once the

new landholders were brought into the privileged circle of the Revolution and seemed politically under control, their leaders, Melancton Smith and others, at first opposed to adoption of the Constitution, switched to support, and with New York ratifying, adoption was ensured. The new freeholders found that they had stopped being tenants, but were now mortgagees, paying back loans from banks instead of rent to landlords.

It seems that the rebellion against British rule allowed a certain group of the colonial elite to replace those loyal to England, give some benefits to small landholders, and leave poor white working people and tenant farmers in very much their old situation.

What did the Revolution mean to the Native Americans, the Indians? They had been ignored by the fine words of the Declaration, had not been considered equal, certainly not in choosing those who would govern the American territories in which they lived, nor in being able to pursue happiness as they had pursued it for centuries before the white Europeans arrived. Now, with the British out of the way, the Americans could begin the inexorable process of pushing the Indians off their lands, killing them if they resisted. In short, as Francis Jennings puts it, the white Americans were fighting against British imperial control in the East, and for their own imperialism in the West.

Before the Revolution, the Indians had been subdued by force in Virginia and in New England. Elsewhere, they had worked out modes of coexistence with the colonies. But around 1750, with the colonial population growing fast, the pressure to move westward onto new land set the stage for conflict with the Indians. Land agents from the East began appearing in the Ohio River valley, on the territory of a confederation of tribes called the Covenant Chain, for which the Iroquois were spokesmen. In New York, through intricate swindling, 800,000 acres of Mohawk land were taken, ending the period of Mohawk-New York friendship. Chief Hendrick of the Mohawks is recorded speaking his bitterness to Governor George Clinton and the provincial council of New York in 1753:

Brother when we came here to relate our Grievances about our Lands, we expected to have something done for us, and we have told you that the Covenant Chain of our Forefathers was like to be broken, and brother you tell us that we shall be redressed at Albany, but we know them so well, we will not trust to them, for they [the Albany merchants] are no people but Devils so . . . as soon as we come home we will send up a Belt of Wampum to our Brothers the other 5 Nations to acquaint them the Covenant Chain is